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## Cognitive Behavioural Coaching

**By Michael Neenan and Stephen Palmer**

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### Introduction

The 'coaching culture' appears to be expanding rapidly in business and industry (Becket, 2000; Daily Telegraph, 2001; Smith, 2000). Coaching can be defined as 'the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another' (Downey, 1999: 15). Coaching can focus on any aspect of a person's life in assisting personal growth.

A number of different approaches to coaching exist (e.g. Fournies, 2000; Whitmore, 1996). Our favoured form of coaching is derived from the principles and practice of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) (Beck, 1976; Ellis, 1994). Cognitive behavioural approaches emphasize that how we react to events is largely determined by our views of them, not by the events themselves. Through examining and re-evaluating some of our less helpful views we can develop and try out alternative viewpoints and behaviours that may be more effective in aiding problem-solving (some individuals may object to the word 'problem' and, instead, see events in terms of challenges, issues, fine-tuning, etc.). We call CBT when used with non-clinical groups cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC). CBC 'does not offer any quick fixes to achieve personal change or "magic away" personal difficulties; it does emphasize that sustained effort and commitment are required for a successful outcome to your life challenges' (Neenan and Dryden, 2002.)

CBC does not seek to give people the answers to their problems or difficulties, but through a collaborative process called guided discovery helps them to reach their own conclusions and solutions (in other words, whenever possible, we let people's brains take the strain of problem-solving). Guided discovery is based on Socratic questioning whereby the coach asks the person a series of questions in order to bring information into her awareness: 'therefore, Socratic questions are designed to promote insight and better rational decision making.

Questions should be phrased in such a way that they stimulate thought and increase awareness, rather than requiring a correct answer' (Beck et al., 1993: 103). Previously, what may have been a closed or constricted system of thinking in relation to tackling a particular difficulty is now transformed into an open or flexible system of identifying a number of problem-solving strategies.

CBC is time-limited, goal-directed and focused on the here and now (historical material, if used, is examined to provide valuable lessons to help guide current behaviour and decision-making). Though the primary aim of coaching is to help individuals develop action plans for change, it also encourages them 'to increase self-awareness of thinking, moods and emotions' (Becket, 2000). For example, if an individual is procrastinating over making a career change, it is likely that anxiety is fuelling her procrastination (e.g. 'I must be absolutely sure that I've made the right move. If my decision backfires, my life will be in ruins'). In this case, an action plan would also include tackling the person's anxious thinking.

The ultimate goal of CBC is for individuals to become their own coaches, though intermittent booster sessions can be arranged once the coaching programme has ended. (In industry, we have found that a few key personnel who have undergone coaching programmes can then deliver cascade coaching to others within the organization; teaching others is an excellent way of maintaining one's own coaching skills.) The number and length of sessions depends on the person's requirements: for example, one hour weekly sessions to tackle an ongoing problem or a marathon three hour session to deal with performance anxiety regarding an imminent public speaking engagement. With regard to performance anxiety, we help people to distinguish between performance interfering thoughts (PITS) and performance enhancing thoughts (PETS) - we have a variety of rhyming acronyms for specific problem areas! Coaching can be conducted face-to-face, by telephone or e-mail (particularly if clients are in other parts of the world).

## A model of problem-solving

Presenting individuals with a problem-solving model to follow may seem at first glance to stifle their creativity but thinking things through in a structured and systematic way actually encourages it. Wasik (1984) has proposed a seven-step problem-solving sequence and accompanying questions that people can ask themselves at each step:

### **Steps**

1. Problem identification
2. Goal selection
3. Generation of alternatives
4. Consideration of consequences
5. Decision making

### **Questions/Actions**

- What is the concern?
- What do I want?
- What can I do?
- What might happen?
- What is my decision?

6. Implementation

Now do it!

7. Evaluation

Did it work?

This seven step model will now be demonstrated by using an example from our coaching practice.

### Step 1: Problem identification

Brian (not his real name) was presenting an important paper at a conference in a few weeks' time and was feeling anxious about it. The 'it' needed to be explored in order to make the problem clear and precise:

*Coach:* What exactly is the 'it': presenting the paper or something else?

*Brian:* It's the shaking. The audience will see my hands shaking and think I'm a nervous wreck. I won't be able to control the shaking.

*Coach:* You state the problem as if there is nothing you can do about the shaking. How could you restate the problem in ways that suggest change is possible?

*Brian:* Presently, I find it difficult to control my shaking when speaking to audiences.

### Step 2: Goal selection

*Coach:* What would you like to achieve with regard to your shaking?

*Brian:* To control it so my hands shake less or not at all.

*Coach:* And if neither of those goals could be achieved by the time of the conference?

*Brian:* To accept the shaking without getting too worried about it.

### Step 3: Generation of alternatives

Brian was encouraged to come up with as many solutions as possible to his problem no matter how stupid or ludicrous they initially sounded; in other words, to brainstorm. The coach can suggest some solutions if the person has difficulty generating them. The solutions proposed by Brian were:

a. 'Keep my hands in my pocket the whole time if possible.'

- b. 'Not present the paper. Pretend I'm ill.'
- c. 'Mention my nervousness to the audience to justify the shaking just before I give my paper. Get it out of the way.'
- d. 'Take tranquillisers.'
- e. 'Accept that my hands shake. So what?'
- f. 'Make a joke every time my hands shake.'
- g. 'Give the paper and see what happens rather than automatically assuming the conference will turn out badly for me.'

#### **Step 4: Consideration of consequences.**

This involved Brian considering the advantages and disadvantages of each solution generated from the brainstorming session. Brian rated the plausibility of each possible solution on a 0-10 scale (0 = least plausible to 10 = most plausible).

- a. 'I would look pretty stiff and awkward if I did that. I can't avoid using my hands while presenting the paper.' 2
- b. 'That sounds good initially but that would be running away and make it much harder to go before an audience at a later date. A non- starter.' 0
- c. 'That might release some tension but it might also suggest I'm asking for their sympathy. A double-edged sword.' 3
- d. 'I don't want the chemical way out. I might come across as somewhat dulled.' 4
- e. 'I like the sound of this one very much and can see the benefits I would reap.' 9
- f. 'This might bring too much unwanted attention to my shaking.' 3
- g. 'This is a reasonable way to approach the conference.' 7

#### **Step 5: Decision-making**

Brian chose steps e and g though he said if these steps were unsuccessful he might choose the tranquillisers (step d) as a last resort. How, he enquired, was he supposed to learn to accept the fact that his hands shook when he usually demanded 'they must not shake'? (PIT).

*Coach:* What happens when you say that to yourself?

*Brian:* It just continually reminds me that I can't control the shaking, I get worried and then my hands shake even more.

*Coach:* So in order to gain control over your shaking, what do you need to give up?

*Brian:* Stop demanding that my hands must not shake. Just let it happen and don't get alarmed about it.

*Coach:* Exactly. What happens when you try to hide it from others?

*Brian:* I feel awkward and self-conscious. So try and be natural around others. My shaking is part of me, that sort of thing. But what happens if people smirk at me or think I'm a nervous wreck.? How do I control that?

*Coach:* Well, what can you control and what can you not? *Brian:* I can't control their smirking or what they might think about me but I can control or choose how I respond to it and how I think about myself.

*Coach:* That's it in a nutshell.

*Brian:* Let's get going then.

## Step 6: Implementation

In the next few weeks, Brian said he no longer tried to hide or control his hands shaking and explained to others that he got nervous in front of audiences both large and small - 'My first step towards accepting the problem and myself for having it'. He said he would like to have a 'rehearsal' before the actual conference. The coach arranged with his colleagues for Brian to present a paper to them. Feedback was given regarding his performance such as not gripping the lectern too tightly and having more sips of water to avoid his voice cracking. A video of the rehearsal was made so Brian could see both his strengths and weaknesses and also re-evaluate more accurately his overall performance: 'Not as bad as I thought. It's hard to be objective about yourself when you're actually doing the talk and thinking you are coming across as a nervous wreck', he concluded.

## Step 7: Evaluation

Brian said that the strategies of 'giving up demands for control in order to gain control and striving for self-acceptance had worked a treat' (he never did resort to tranquillisers). While he had been nervous and his hands did shake at times, his major focus had been on presenting the paper rather than his own discomfort. On the lectern was a message encapsulating his new outlook: 'If I shake, so what?' (PET).

If the proposed solution has been successful, then the person can select another problem he wishes to tackle and follow steps 1-6 again. It is important to tackle methodically one major problem at a time rather than several problems simultaneously. As Butler and Hope (1996: 69) point out, 'Remember the 80:20 rule: 80% of difficulties are due to 20% of problems. If you tackle, one by one, the few most important problems, you will be overcoming a disproportionately large number of problems' (original authors' italics).

Once the person becomes adept at using the seven-step model, he may want to use a shorter model to quicken the problem-solving process. For example, STIR and PIE:

<b>S</b> elect a problem	<b>P</b> roblem definition
<b>T</b> arget a solution	<b>I</b> mplement a solution
<b>I</b> mplement a solution	<b>E</b> valuate outcome
<b>R</b> ever outcome	

These shorter models of problem-solving are usually used for rapid processing of a problem in order to deal with a crisis or make a quick decision. With these shorter models, deliberation is exchanged for speed, so a less satisfactory outcome may be experienced by the person.

## Excessive emotional interference

Sometimes during the coaching process, the person may become so emotionally upset that she 'gives up' on the model or her ability to focus on it is significantly impaired. If this emotional interference occurs, the coach can employ the ABCDE sequence of emotional management (Neenan and Dryden, 2000):

A = activating event - stops working on the solution chosen at step 5

B = distress-producing beliefs - 'Sorting things out shouldn't be this bloody difficult! Nothing seems to be working. Why the hell bother? It's all a waste of time.'

C = consequences: emotion - anger and despair behaviour - agitation and withdrawal

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D = self-disputing - 'If I don't sort things out, I'll end up with more problems, not less. Now get back on track and give up these silly ideas that change should be quick and easy. If it's taking longer and harder than expected, too damn bad!'

E = effective reduction in anger and despair which enables the person to return to persisting with her proposed solution at step 5

When the person's emotional distress has ameliorated, then she can resume following the problem-solving model; it is pointless to try and follow the model when the client is emotionally upset (if there is no amelioration in her emotional state, then a referral to a clinical specialist is indicated).

## Conclusion

CBC is based on a collaborative relationship that helps individuals to focus on problem-solving in a structured and systematic way. Using a Socratic approach encourages individuals to 'pull out' from themselves problem-solving strategies rather than have them handed over by the coach. Drawing on and adding to their existing skills helps individuals to build greater self-reliance and confidence in managing change in their lives. Previously, some difficulties may have seemed formidable, even insuperable, but now they can be managed or resolved within the problem-solving frameworks described in this article.

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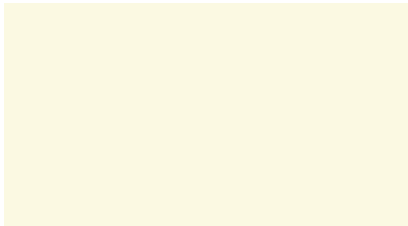
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